

Integrative Health and Healing: “Looking In” to “Left Out” Medicine

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All forms of healing are “alternative.” They are paths contemplated by those of us who seek relief from physical, emotional, or spiritual suffering. But how do we know the safest and best path? This is the dilemma all of us will confront sometime in our life and in the lives of those we love.

History shows that we have always been willing to try almost anything to avoid suffering and delay death. Physician Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote, “. . . there is nothing men will not do, there is nothing they have not done to recover their health and save their lives.”¹ When I faced my own death from Stage IV Lymphoma, I was willing to try anything not only to save my life but also to lessen my pain and the suffering of my family. The whole body irradiation, chemotherapy, poisonous substances injected into my body, and bone marrow transplant were radical “alternative” approaches just decades ago, proving that what medical science considers as “alternative” or “complementary” today often becomes standard practice tomorrow.

My life was saved by following many alternative paths, including the approaches of ancient Hawai'i. But how do we know which paths are safe to take? How do we know how to heal when many practitioners seem so narrowly confined to and protective of their own paths? How do we know which of what have been called the “left out” medicines not typically taught in United States medical schools, should remain left out?² How can we make enlightened choices about our own and our family's health and healing when we feel overwhelmed by so many paths and so many people beckoning us with such confidence in their way? How can we find our own unique way to wellness when there can be such dogmatism and narrow-mindedness within the healing arts themselves? How can we avoid self-delusion at those times when we are so afraid and needy?

Modern science provides one of the most powerful methods for guarding against self-delusion and quackery. It is a powerful system for help in our decision-making, but it is not the only system for assessing the worthiness of a healing path. Most alternative medicines have their roots in indigenous cultures with long histories and their own unique scientific paradigms. As Einstein pointed out, not everything that counts can be counted and not everything that can be counted counts. Myths, chants, legends, and ancestral wisdom have value, too. When considering an alternative medicine, it is essential to understand not only its “technique” but its cultural history and perspective regarding health, healing, and illness. In making our decision about our healing alternatives, the issue can be

“and” and not “or.”

While many speak of a “holistic” approach, we too often find ourselves in a contest of dogmas. Even when the scientific method discovers a clearly life saving device, dogmatism can persist. Benjamin Franklin's eighteenth century lightening rod saved countless homes and lives, but some condemned him for deflecting God's aim when His judgment was to destroy the home of a particular sinner.³ What is needed to truly look “in” to the left out medicines is a combination of a cautiously modern mind, an indigenous heart sensitive to cultural wisdom, and a patient balance between sound logic and openhearted exploration of all alternatives free of propaganda and open to learning, rather than unquestioning dependence. In other words, we must truly get “in” to the approach and its origins rather than just look “at” it.

One problem with looking into alternative healing approaches is that we often do so when we are desperate and least able to make rational choices. It is wise to start exploring the healing paths at times when we do not feel pressured to accept almost any source of new hope. The time to consider alternatives to healing is when we feel least in need of healing.

Here are some questions I asked when I confronted my own death. I do not suggest that my list is any way complete. I offer it only as a stimulus for developing your own questions regarding consideration of the “left out” medicines.

1. ARE YOU CLEAR ON WHAT CONSTITUTES HEALTH FOR YOU? How do you define health and healing in your life? How will you know when a healing approach is helping? Will you define health as only the absence of symptoms and avoiding death or with a view to being whole, connected, and in alignment between your body, mind, soul, family, ancestors, and the land?
2. DO YOU HAVE AN OPEN MIND? Do you see all approaches, even modern medicine, as alternative ingredients from which to concoct your own healing elixir? Are you “considering” or just “jumping in” to a healing approach out of despair?
3. ARE YOU CONSIDERING THE “SYSTEM” AND NOT JUST THE TECHNIQUE? Do you understand the origins of the healing system you are considering? Are you willing to embrace the cultural, historical, and spiritual assumptions of the system from which the strength of the procedure in question derives rather than trying to use its “techniques?”

4. DO YOU KNOW THE EVIDENCE? What is the track record of the approach you are considering? Have you asked people you trust about it? Have you read about the process in reputable sources other than advertisements and promotions materials? Remember, modern medical science considers anecdotes as just stories, but a lot of anecdotes become data. Whether that data is sufficient depends on reading more, asking more of those without a vested interest in the procedure, and talking to someone who may have experienced the process first hand.

5. WHAT IS THE RISK/REWARD RATIO? There are risks with all healing approaches. All interventions have both positive and negative effects, so ask not only about their good points but their dangers.

6. DO YOU HAVE FAITH IN THE SYSTEM? All healing is faith healing, but blind faith can kill you. If you do not have sincere faith in the system or practitioner you select, you deprive any healing system of much of its power. If your faith is born of desperation rather than careful reflection, contemplation, and sharing with someone you trust, you risk mistaking false reliance for true confidence.

7. CAN YOU WAIT JUST A WHILE? Fast decisions regarding healing are usually regretted decisions. When it comes to your health, try to have a "tortoise mind" and not a "hare brain." Do not just try to decide. Instead, take time to see what comes to you.

8. ARE YOU BEING SEDUCED? Remember, degrees are earned but being a healer is a gift. It relates to less tangible matters such as experience, spiritual integrity, respect for cultural lineage, and a kind and gentle heart. Do not allow the status, power, or prestige of the practitioner to overwhelm you. There is a crucial partnership that must form between the patient and the healer. Ask yourself if the approach is being humbly offered rather than arrogantly sold.

9. ARE YOU REMAINING FREE TO CHOOSE? Healing is a dynamic process. All life systems are in a constant state of flux. Keep your mind and heart open and keep asking, learning, and considering if you feel that you are moving toward your definition of well-being.

10. ARE YOU PRAYING? No matter what alternative technique or approach you decide to try, keep praying and keep asking others to pray for you. Science cannot explain all the reasons why, but the research is clear that prayer and the effects of our and others intentions even at a distance can have a positive effect on whatever healing path we elect to follow.⁴ As most indigenous cultures have taught for millennia and the Bible states, "And he spake a parable unto them to this end, that men ought always to pray . . ."⁵

our situation not from the continental "rock" logic orientation but from a more Hawaiian oceanic, water logic. Perhaps then we would be freer to flow upon and within rather than decide and follow.

References

1. Quotation from Oliver Wendell Holmes is in *Medical Essays*. Boston, Mass: Houghton Mifflin; 1883.
2. The term "left out medicine" was used by David Eisenberg, MD and his colleagues to refer to medical interventions not taught widely in the medical schools of the United States. Eisenberg DM, Kessler C, et al. Unconventional Medicine in the United States: Prevalence, Costs, and Patterns of Use. *New Engl J Med*. 1993;328:245-252.
3. Lorimer D. *Whole in One*. London, England: Arkana, 1990:157-158.
4. For a summary of the research on prayer, see: Dossey L. *Healing Words: The Power of Prayer and the Practice of Medicine*. New York, NY: HarperCollins; 1993.
5. Luke 18:1

FIVE WAYS TO DIE ON THE GOLF COURSE:

1. Hit by a golf ball.
2. Run over by a golf cart.
3. Whacked by a golf club.
4. Struck by lightning.
5. Forgot your hat.

Surprisingly, one million new cases of skin cancer are detected every year. One person an hour in the U.S. dies from melanoma, the deadliest form of skin cancer. If you spend a lot of time in the sun, you should protect yourself. One out of five Americans develops skin cancer during their lifetime. Don't be one of them. Stay out of the midday sun. Cover up. Wear a hat. Seek shade. And use sunscreen. For more information on how to protect yourself from skin cancer, call 1-888-462-DERM or visit www.aad.org.



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Now that I have been cured of cancer and encountered so many alternative healing ways, I wonder if perhaps we should not be looking for healing paths at all. Perhaps we should instead consider